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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a summary of an integrated model of the moral agent, based on findings in philosophy, psychology, and education. The components of the model are cognition, affect, action, and community. Reasoning, the actor's emotional nature, free choice and character formation, and the development of the person within the social setting are all crucial components in the formation of the moral agent. The interaction of these various elements can be seen in the example of an employer deciding whether to use racial factors to discriminate among job applicants. In coming to a decision on this problem the employer has many opportunities to recognize the problem, to deliberate carefully, and to act in a way that considers the human good. Understanding right and wrong action requires understanding all aspects of the model. (IS)

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SYNOPSIS OF AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF THE ACTING PERSON

Frederick E. Ellrod III

October 1983

This abstract summarizes the results of the philosophical phase of a four-year project on the foundations of moral education sponsored by the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. 20064. The complete results are to be published in a series of three volumes:

I. Act and Agent: Philosophical Foundations of Moral Education
II. Psychological Foundations of Moral Education
III. Character Development in Schools and Beyond

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SYNOPSIS OF AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF THE ACTING PERSON

Frederick E. Ellrod III (10/83)

The three volumes of this series work from an integrated model of the moral agent; that is, one which attempts to take into account all the data and all the insights which contribute to a sound understanding of the moral person. It is based, then, upon the findings of all three disciplines, philosophy, psychology, and education. The first two volumes present the various aspects of the model, and some of their implications, in philosophy and psychology respectively. The third volume applies the model to the problems of carrying out good moral education.

We may for the sake of analysis consider the important factors of the model under four headings: cognition, affect, action and community. It should be noted, however, that neither these general headings nor the factors mentioned within them are meant to represent wholly independent, compartmentalized functions. In the good moral agent they work together in complex and shifting ways. (See the example which follows the description for illustration.)

1. Cognition. The integrative model recognizes the correctness of the insight by cognitive-developmentalists and cognitive-analysts that reasoning plays an essential role in moral action, and thus that the development of modes of ethical thinking is a vital part of moral development. Such abilities as universalization, moral imagination, and judicious weighing of multiple considerations in making a decision are comprehended

under this head. We hold in addition, however, that to evaluate a person's moral development it is necessary to consider the content of the ideas about which reasoning takes place, and that the central element in that content is the good or value. Thus there is an objective foundation for ethics in the human good, but the person grows up slowly in his ideas concerning that good, as well as in his ability to reason about them.

2. Affect. The integrative model also accepts the insistence of many critics of cognitive-developmental theory that the emotional or affective nature of the person is important for moral development. In this area we hold that commitment to what is good, with its appropriate affective responses of love, pity, guilt, shame, and hate with regard to appropriate objects, is required if a person is to act well. These emotions have both motivational importance, as help or hindrance in right action, and importance as helping to reveal what is good or bad (and thus overlap the cognitive area).

3. Action or Behavior. It is also necessary to carry forward the moral decision in a controlled, systematic, and sustained fashion into the moral act, as many traditional approaches to character development recognized. Here we assert that the good moral agent must be free to act in the light of moral norms, not the mere creature of previous influences (including his own character), and thus that a theory of free choice is part of the complete account of moral development. At the same time we hold that this free choice is expressed through relatively stable tendencies, traits of character which include patterns of cognitive,

emotive, and active response called skills and virtues. Character formation will thus also have a place in any adequate scheme of moral education, but one seen in the light of the freedom and autonomy necessary in a moral agent, as well as the rational thoughtfulness and affective involvement indicated above.

4. Community. Acknowledging the contributions of social-learning theory and social psychology generally, the integrative model includes an account of the ways in which the cognitive, affective, and behavioral capabilities of the moral agent are developed not in solitude, but as shaped and influenced by a social environment in which law, tradition, and interpersonal relationships are important factors. While the environment is not all-determining (given the freedom mentioned above), it is a very strong influence on the developing person, which may be both beneficial and harmful. At the limits of the moral person's relations to others must be considered his religious life, the ways in which moral development may be influenced by relationships to an ultimate Other.

The Acting Person. In order to avoid a model of the moral agent which is merely a bundle of discrete capacities, these various factors must be unified in a single human being. In the integrative model it is the notion of the person which provides this unifying framework: it is the person as an enduring and changing being who thinks, feels, acts, and relates.

We claim that this model is an adequate one for understanding moral action. It should, therefore, provide the conceptual tools

for analysis of the making and execution of moral decisions. To illustrate this, we may consider an example of a moral act. Our case here is a relatively simple and straightforward decision, so that the various elements mentioned above may be seen at work in a situation where most would agree on the appropriate resolution.

Let us suppose that an employer is faced with a decision: whether to use racial factors to discriminate among job applicants. To perceive that there is a choice to be made involves a sense of freedom to act in several different ways; to recognize that it is a morally problematic one requires a certain moral sensitivity, in part a function of emotional empathy and cognitive alertness, in part a function of the social environment, which may highlight or obscure the relevant considerations by providing socially accepted interpretations or descriptions of the possible actions. Once the issue is recognized, the agent may confront it directly by choosing to think it through; or he may allow his action to be governed by whatever feelings and opinions are already present. This initial decision to consider the question openly will itself be determined by the affective commitments, the previous habituation to clear or muddy thought, and the willed choice of the agent.

If the matter is immediately evident as one covered by previous thinking-out and commitment, as when the employer has grappled with such cases before and resolved to act without prejudice in the future, then little active consideration here will be necessary. The patterns of action which make up his character, guided by the particular features of this case, will

lead him into action without the need to completely re-think or re-resolve to carry out a solution. If, on the other hand, the individual is not prepared to deal with such a case at once, then the more active process of thought which Aristotle called deliberation will begin.

Once the agent is deliberating, he must, if he is to think well, have as the basis of his thinking the human good. This may comprehend many valuable or disvaluable factors in the possible actions: the effects on the job candidate, on the system or institution, on the character of the agent himself, and perhaps the worth of the action as such. Some of these will be more important than others. A more or less accurate understanding of goods and evils will supply the content of the moral judgment, based upon critically analyzed affective and emotional response; it will be taken into account according to a well-balanced scheme of moral reasoning having (for instance) impartiality and universality among its characteristics. The agent should be aware that justice demands fair consideration for each candidate; his knowledge of the purpose of hiring enables him to see what qualities of the candidate are relevant to fitness for the position; and from this it becomes clear that racial factors are not relevant. To use them to make one's decision would not only deprive the candidate of an important good, but might be said to show disrespect for him as a person to be considered on a par with others, and would set a harmful precedent institutionally as well. Thus he may arrive at the answer that racial factors should not be taken into account.

It is now necessary to enact the decision arrived at. Here

the mainly cognitive factors of deliberation give way to the mainly non-cognitive factors of execution. The employer may have to overcome a certain reluctance to act impartially (prejudice), or to stick his own neck out by doing so (lack of courage); he will be assisted in doing to by courage and fidelity to the truth. It may be necessary for him to encourage or discourage certain of his own feelings about the situation in order to do the right thing. The manner in which it is done will depend on his detailed perception of the situation: it may be necessary to win certain others over, to convince or rebut, to work through certain channels. All this will be directed by the free choice of the agent, often as "delegated" to established disciplines of character, operating within the limitations of the situation: to rouse some reactions and suppress others, make certain efforts and take certain actions (telephone calls, writing of documents, signing of forms). The perceived influences of social and religious norms will also form hindering or helping factors here.

The good moral agent, then, must both <u>think</u> and <u>act</u> within a complex social <u>context</u> in order to carry out successfully the moral act. All of the aspects of the agent mentioned above are required to explain how such action may be performed rightly or wrongly. To work them out in greater detail is the task of the three volumes of this work.

(Oral presentation at the Nov. 1983 meeting of the Association for Moral Education, on a project sponsored by the Council for Research in Values & Philosophy: "Foundations of Moral Education")